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ABSTRACT

There is a growing, but frequently unrecognized, group of nontraditional students in teacher education programs today, defined as people entering such programs after a prolonged absence from formal education and/or people changing careers. This paper presents two teacher educators' reflections on their failure to recognize such student diversity in their elementary social studies methods course, noting how it negatively affected the classroom climate and instruction and discussing how the educators worked to enhance learning for all students. Throughout the semester, the educators engaged in reflection-on-action and deliberate reflection. After each class session, they discussed what they had taught, how they taught it, students' responses, and how they interpreted the responses in light of their goals for the course. Through this reflection, they began to recognize the diversity of their students and tensions within the classroom between traditional and nontraditional students. Differences between the groups included: students' recognition of prior knowledge, students' acquisition of new knowledge, and students' awareness of remaining gaps in learning. The educators used their understandings to make future decisions that would make instruction more relevant to the entire class. The paper presents implications for practice related to identifying students' status and designing and developing activities. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: Nontraditional students

Nontraditional students and their influence on teacher education

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Abstract

There is a growing but frequently unrecognized group of nontraditional students in teacher education programs today. We define nontraditional students as people entering such programs after a prolonged absence from formal education and/or people changing careers. We focus primarily on this often invisible form of diversity not just because we find it interesting, but also because our failure to recognize it early in our elementary socials studies methods course affected the classroom climate and instruction. The reflections contained in this paper document our efforts to thoughtfully and systematically consider our teaching in order to enhance learning for all. We end with a discussion of the implications our specific efforts have for teacher education.

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Nontraditional students and their influence on teacher education

As teacher educators, we believe our most effective teaching occurs when we know our students well and are able to use this knowledge to address diverse individual needs. We agree with Gilman's (1993) assertion that "a teacher must be willing to meet the student at the student's level. Both the spirit and the letter of inclusionary education and diversity demand that we, as educators, can do nothing else" (p. 149). Race and gender are often clearly visible evidence of diversity in the classroom, while other important but often invisible characteristics (e.g., age and socioeconomic status) can have equally powerful effects on learning. As Pendlebury (1995) suggests, "the salient features of a [teaching] situation do not jump to the eye ready labeled for easy identification. It is up to the teacher to pick them out" (p. 60). In other words, it is essential that teachers be alert, observant, and open-minded in their instructional endeavors to better understand students' needs.

The organization of this article parallels our reflections regarding an elementary social studies methods course that we team-taught one summer session. As Valli, (1997) points out,

> Reflective teachers have the ability to think about their teaching behaviors and the context in which they occur. They can look back on events; make judgements about them; and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge. (p. 70)

As a team, we shared a commitment to the ideals and practice of teacher reflection and were determined to make time to engage in reflection while team teaching. To this end, we engaged in reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) and deliberate reflection (Valli, 1992, 1997) throughout the semester. After each class session, we talked about what we taught, how we taught it, students' responses and how we interpreted these in light of our goals for the course. These daily reflections developed into more deliberative ones when we finally recognized a diversity among our students that was not readily, nor easily identified, that is, it was invisible to us for most of the session.

This invisible diversity to which we refer consisted of the large number of nontraditional students in our class. We define nontraditional students as people entering a teacher education program after a prolonged absence from formal education and/or people changing careers. We focus this article primarily on this invisible diversity not just because we find it interesting, but also because our failure to recognize it early in our methods course caused problems within our classroom. Once this diversity became visible to us, we were able to better understand all our students' perceptions but it was too late in the course to benefit them. However, we used our deliberate reflections (Valli, 1997) to make future instructional decisions based on "research, experience, the advice of other teachers, [and] personal beliefs and values..." (p. 77). The reflections presented in this paper provide insights into the development of our understandings of our methods students and the subsequent influence on our instruction. We end with a discussion of implications for better identifying and understanding the vast array of students in our programs in order to improve teacher education practices through the design and development of more individualized instruction.

What Became Visible When

We believed we had planned for diversity when we organized our summer elementary social studies methods class. The diversity we anticipated included gender, race, stage in the university's teacher education program, and learning styles (e.g., visual learners, kinesthetic learners). However, as the semester progressed, we found ourselves confronting diversity of a kind we had not anticipated. In fact, we were unable to clearly label this diversity until near the end of the course. Eventually, we identified the diversity as the division between nontraditional and traditional students in our class.

Clear Vision: Early Impressions

As the methods course began, we were intently focused on accomplishing a semester's worth of work in a four-week summer session. We asked students to fill out a survey on the first day and to identify personal learning goals and prior knowledge, but we gathered no other information about them except their names. Even so, when we first looked out on our class of 47

summer school students, we saw some individual differences. We noticed two African Americans, two white-haired men, two Asians, one man dressed in an official government uniform and one woman in tears.

We were pleased at the apparent diversity, concerned about the woman in tears, and believed we had selected materials and planned activities that would be meaningful for all our students. During the first week, we began to have a stronger sense of our students as individuals and of the appropriateness of our instruction. This increased awareness was fostered by conversations with students in our office and our observations of students' interactions. For example, students brought us a variety of excuses for impending absences and reasons for difficulties with assignments. We also noticed groups of students beginning to form. These clusters of students chose to work together and to socialize before and after class. We viewed this clustering as normal group formation and were not concerned.

The requirements of the course were rigorous and the pace was accelerated, due in large measure to our compressed summer schedule. For example, every day we used different social studies content to model a specific instructional strategy. In addition, we required students to write - overnight - a lesson plan, which included a modification for a special needs student. Every day we returned the previous day's work with comments students could use, if they chose, to revise that assignment in addition to completing the new one. Students increased their interactions with us as this classroom routine progressed.

As our interactions with students increased, we began to see previously invisible individual differences that could explain some of the groupings within the class. One group of students came to us with questions because they had never written lesson plans before, did not understand how to mesh lesson objectives with unit goals, and had difficulty finding resources to use in lesson creation. A second group of students came to us because they equated cooperative learning with the traditional group work they and their children had experienced and they had strong objections to using this method. The eight or nine students in this second group also wanted to design instruction based on models from the armed services, business training, or

teachers they remembered as being effective. These students were more inclined to challenge than to ask questions associated with materials or assignments.

Blurred Vision: Revised Impressions

By the end of the second week, the community of learners we hoped to create appeared to divide along lines we could not clearly label. We recognized the division, but did not know the reasons for it. Both groups appeared to contain a variety of race, gender, and age. We thought that these group formations, while not necessarily negative, separated students and prevented their beneficial interactions with one another.

By the end of the third week, some students had begun to snipe at each other in the intense working setting of our classroom. Students limited interactions to their by now permanent seat-mates except when we specifically designed groupings that forced people outside their self-determined clusters. We designed activities that required people to get up and move, to go on mini-field trips into the local community, and to share ideas and experiences with the entire class. Nonetheless, we sensed an undercurrent of resentment and separation and the reasons for this were still not visible.

During the third week, our personal conversations and reflections regarding our classroom instruction contained an increased number of references to nontraditional students. We noticed differences in their comments, their perceptions, their needs, and their concerns when compared to their traditional classmates. As we contemplated these various differences between our students, we were intrigued and believed this was an issue we might explore in more depth. We recognized that appearance was not necessarily an accurate guide to determining nontraditional status. For example, one woman who appeared to be younger than 20 and who dressed in typical collegiate summer attire turned out to be a single parent dealing with child care issues while employed and completing her elementary education degree. She had also experienced two significant interruptions in her college career.

Re-Vision: Muddled Impressions

In the final week of the course, an event occurred that made the separation between nontraditional and traditional students clearly visible. We were modeling the use of K-W-L charts (Ogle, 1986; Carr & Ogle, 1987) with an integrated unit on the environment. This strategy begins by recording what students Know (K) about a concept/issue. Next, students generate a list of things they Wonder or Want to know (W) about the concept/issue. The teacher then facilitates learning experiences designed to teach students about the concept/issue. In the end, students return to the chart and fill in the L-column with what they Learned.

For the learning experiences in our model lesson on the environment, we showed a short video by a British environmental group. The animated video asked viewers to consider the ecological impact of various human activities on the earth as a whole. The narrator of the video was a cartoon figure of "Mother Earth" who described how human actions affect her. At the end of the video, the class exploded into unanticipated controversy. One group of students was extremely angry. They objected to what they viewed as the video's promotion of vegetarianism, were upset by "Mother Earth" and perceived this as an anti-religious portrayal. They were also incensed about exposing elementary students to problematic global issues. A second group of students expressed confusion and frustration at the first group's furious reactions. As we observed our now familiar students, we recognized that these two groups were dividing along generational lines. For the first time, we saw a clear split between nontraditional and traditional students. The nontraditional students took issue with the video and were vocal about their concerns. The traditional students were nonplussed by the video; it was "No big deal."

Initially, we were dumbstruck by the reaction to the video. However, we regained our senses within minutes and tried to focus the ensuing discussion in a positive way. From past experiences, we knew that each of us was comfortable with classroom discussions of controversial issues. We also shared the idea that discussions should be about issues and not people, themselves. Therefore, we tried to facilitate this type of discussion. Unfortunately, the initial eruption of anger by some and the puzzled responses of others seemed to damage the

classroom environment at the end of the class period - a point where we had very little time to repair it.

We spent that afternoon and evening reflecting on and conversing about this unanticipated classroom episode. We tried to identify the reasons for the schism, what we might have done to prevent it, and what we could do to repair it. As we talked, the strength of the differences between our nontraditional and traditional students became clearer and clearer. We used this new-found lens to reconsidered previous classroom interactions and activities and realized that the mix of nontraditional and traditional students seemed to have a powerful impact on the learning environment. But we also realized that we had no clear evidence regarding student identification in this respect. Only two days of class remained.

In the class period following the video, student interactions were muted and polite. We tried to debrief the previous day's experience and to reinforce the right of all students to express their views. However, both nontraditional and traditional students had passionately revealed their personal beliefs and values and now needed to retreat to safer, less vulnerable positions. We respected this sentiment and did not pursue the issue beyond a discussion of different strategies to use when addressing potentially controversial issues in the classroom.

At this point, we believed we clearly saw a previously invisible but powerful diversity. However, we did not have any evidence beyond our instincts to substantiate this division. We decided to determine exactly how our students identified themselves in terms of nontraditional vs. traditional status. We provided definitions of nontraditional and traditional status, then asked class members to self-identify. To assist in their self-identification, we described nontraditional students as people entering the teacher education program after a prolonged absence from formal education and/or people changing careers. We described traditional students as people who entered college shortly after graduating from high school and whose undergraduate careers were uninterrupted.

When we tallied these self-identifications, we were amazed to find that 24 of our 47 students considered themselves nontraditional. We had correctly identified about twelve people

in this category from previous informal conversations. Obviously many nontraditional students had remained invisible to us, and so had their deeply ingrained personal beliefs, values and expectations. We had directed our instruction and designed our expectations for the diversity we expected and recognized. We had not made sufficient provisions to address the needs of this heretofore-invisible segment of our student population.

Hindsight

Looking back, we saw that our informal data gathering combined with our reflective conversations eventually enabled us to clearly identify the division in our class. As we reconsidered the responses and achievements of our students, we found that we possessed documentation of differences between nontraditional and traditional students. We believed, from the beginning, that it was important to continuously monitor learning and attitudes in order to make prompt and appropriate instructional changes. To these ends, we had incorporated frequent informal assessment activities into this intensive summer course. These informal assessment activities included pre- and post-course surveys, and students' writing samples (open-topic and assigned reflections, lesson plans, and an end-of-course self-assessment essay). When the class was over, these materials provided a rich data source for analysis that went beyond our personal reflections and conversations. In this regard, our approach mirrored many classroom teachers'; we did not go to educational theory until problems surfaced in our practice that we wanted to solve.

Realizations in Light of the Research

We were intent on continuing our deliberate reflection (Valli, 1997) with respect to the summer methods course. We wanted to try to better understand what happened in our classroom, especially those final days of the session, from a perspective beyond our existing knowledge base. To this end, we re-visited students' work and considered it data. We also explored the literature focused on nontraditional students in higher education. We were particularly interested in nontraditional students in teacher education programs.

To begin our data analysis, we separately read and re-read the student reflections and used open coding to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, we compared our preliminary findings and compiled a list of similar themes we had both identified. These themes emerged through our repeated readings, listenings, and reflections. After identifying the common themes of confidence, prior knowledge, and acquisition of new knowledge, we returned to the students' writing and completed more focused coding. Once coding was complete, we separated student reflections and self-assessments based on students' nontraditional or traditional status to determine if there were patterns which differentiated the two groups. While we were coding data, we also began examining the research literature regarding nontraditional students in teacher education.

We had not realized the high proportion of nontraditional students in our classroom or the influence this would have on our classroom learning environment. The research literature indicates that the increasing number of nontraditional students is a trend that many teacher educators are likely to experience. According to the Pew Higher Education Research Program (1990), "by the middle of the 1990s, traditional college students - those who proceed directly from high school to enroll full-time in an undergraduate program - will be a clear minority of all students in collegiate programs" (p. 11). If the proportion of traditional students in general higher education is declining, their proportions will likely decrease in colleges of education, as well. Yet, many of our college classrooms are designed to meet the needs of traditional students (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1991) without considering students from nontraditional backgrounds.

In her review of research addressing attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers on teaching, Richardson (1996) states, "The most powerful group differences appear to be those between traditional and nontraditional students and between elementary and secondary majors" (p. 109). We dealt with only one of these group differences because all our students were elementary majors. We can attest to the powerful nature of the differences between nontraditional and traditional students revealed in their emotional responses to the video

described earlier. However, these differences were initially invisible to us and may also be unrecognized by other teacher educators. As with any form of diversity, we must first recognize its presence in our classrooms before we can appropriately respond to it.

While research regarding adult learners is vast, the body of research designed to specifically examine nontraditional students in teacher education is limited. We categorized the literature we found on nontraditional students in teacher education as empirical research (e.g., Powell, 1992; Serow, 1993) and personal considerations (e.g., Gilman, 1993; Greenland, 1993). Across this rather limited research base there is general consensus that differences exist between nontraditional and traditional preservice teachers and that these differences should influence the way teacher educators plan and deliver instruction. Examples of these differences include: grades (Post & Killian, 1993; Ah-Sing, 1993); levels of confidence (Bray, 1995; deBlois, 1993); ability to relate new concepts to life experiences (Post & Killian, 1993); school and life experiences as well as influence of personal beliefs and values (Powell, 1992); and expectations from teacher education programs (Serow, 1993).

We, too, found differences between our nontraditional and traditional preservice teachers as we critically reflected on the course, tallied the surveys, and analyzed students' writing samples. The differences that emerged in our classroom included: a) students' recognition of prior knowledge, b) students' acquisition of new knowledge, and c) students' awareness of remaining gaps in learning. In the following sections, we discuss each of these differences in conjunction with related research literature. We focus primarily on our nontraditional students in order to make their characteristics more visible, not to diminish the characteristics of their traditional classmates.

Recognition of Prior Knowledge

Nontraditional students wrote more extensively than their traditional classmates did with respect to their prior knowledge and experiences in relation to our classroom activities. We found, as did Powell (1992), comprehensive comments by nontraditional students regarding experiences from previous careers as well as the school experiences of their children and even

grandchildren. These comments appeared in written reflections on topics of diversity, integrated curriculum and self-knowledge. Students indicated their recognition of prior knowledge by using phrases such as "I have re-learned..." and "...information surfaced or [was] recalled that I forgot was there."

Nontraditional students' more extensive recognition of prior knowledge served as a rich resource for their class discussions and the development of their class assignments. Whether the prior knowledge came from a previous job, travel, and/or parenthood, nontraditional students were able to draw upon a wealth of experience beyond their traditional classmates. Nontraditional students frequently visualized their own children and grandchildren when assessing the appropriateness of their expectations. As one man said, "I guess my plans for this first grade unit were too ambitious. I was imagining my seven year old grandson doing them, but he is really gifted."

Acquisition of New Knowledge

Nontraditional students wrote comments referring to the acquisition of new knowledge half as often as their traditional classmates. Several factors might have contributed to this distinction. Their perceived higher level of prior knowledge may have led nontraditional students to believe they already knew much of what we taught. The following statements from three nontraditional students illustrate this perception:

- "I have a good base of teaching techniques and activities...."
- "Honestly, I am not sure what I have learned about diversity in my classroom...I am glad the topic was dealt with in this course because so many of my peers are in the dark about our diverse nation."
- "I have become more cognitively aware of the knowledge I have stored in my long-term memory."

Given our interactions with students and their course work, we were not sure their confidence was necessarily justified.

On the other hand, perhaps nontraditional students did know more pedagogy and content than we initially thought. Just as we did not learn enough about student diversity, we also did not know enough about students' prior knowledge levels. In our first class session, the woman in tears was crying because all the educational terms were new to her and she felt, as she told us later, hopelessly lost. She was a nontraditional student. Without a thorough assessment of prior knowledge, we had no way of knowing precisely how much she and our other students knew, and therefore, what new knowledge they acquired from our course.

We found some evidence that nontraditional students were less open to new knowledge regarding teaching. Instead, they seemed to seek reinforcement and maintenance of personal beliefs and values as Serow (1993) found in his study. The strength and influence of personal beliefs and values regarding teaching represent an important difference between nontraditional and traditional preservice teachers (deBlois, 1993; Powell, 1992; Serow, 1993). Our nontraditional students' beliefs regarding group work illustrate the difficulty of acquiring new knowledge. As one nontraditional student wrote, "cooperative learning has always been a thorn in my side...." Several other nontraditional students shared this belief and saw the group work they had experienced and the cooperative learning we described as synonymous. Even when we modeled cooperative learning and directly contrasted it to simple group work, these students were reluctant to discard their old understandings for this concept.

Some evidence also suggests that nontraditional students are more likely to challenge the information presented by instructors (Richter-Antion, 1986) - especially when it contradicts their beliefs and values. One of our nontraditional students admitted in a written reflection, "...I had over many years set up all my little ducks in a row, and then super-glued them in place." This apparent inflexibility may compound the difficulty nontraditional students have acquiring new information regarding teaching. We certainly experienced several challenges from students who later identified themselves as nontraditional, culminating with the environmental video fiasco. Such challenges may arise because nontraditional students expect teacher education programs to support rather than challenge their personal beliefs and values.

Remaining Gaps in Knowledge

All teachers seek to help students recognize gaps in their knowledge and understanding. Our objectives for the elementary social studies methods course included helping students understand that there were gaps in their knowledge with respect to teaching, presenting new information with which they could fill some of those gaps, and facilitating students' abilities to identify and address the gaps that remained. Nontraditional students identified gaps in knowledge that we categorize as issues related to the art of teaching. We associated students' statements concerning the need to know more with respect to managing classroom interactions, establishing appropriate expectations, and reflecting productively on personal performance with the art of teaching. Three nontraditional students expressed their concerns as follows:

- "I really want to arouse a passion for making the connections between stories learned and ideas we live."
- "[My improvement as a teacher] includes not only the academic aspect of teaching, but also considers the personal lives of individual students."
- "...I found myself constantly wondering would students be able to do this?...am I making things too hard or too easy for students? What happens if some students can and some students can't?"

The technology of teaching dominates many methods courses. We were unable to find the most appropriate way to blend this technology with the art of teaching in order to address our nontraditional students' concerns. As a result, we did not meet the needs of our entire class. We were also unable to locate research that focused on differences in nontraditional and traditional students' recognition of gaps in their teaching knowledge.

Implications for Practice

The proportion of nontraditional students in teacher education programs has increased substantially and will continue to do so. Our experiences in this course lead us to believe that failure to adequately identify and address this often-invisible diversity in teacher education courses may result in unanticipated difficulties and may limit the effectiveness of instruction.

Our experiences, research and reflections lead us to believe there are implications for addressing this changing population in our own classrooms and in others' classrooms, as well. These implications include the need for identifying students' status and designing and developing instructional activities that meet the needs of both nontraditional and traditional students.

Identifying Students' Status

The first gap that must be filled is the instructor's awareness of differences among students, such as their nontraditional or traditional status and which educational issues concern them. It is inappropriate for us to assume we know our students' special characteristics and needs, especially those not immediately visible. Instead, we need to introduce ourselves and allow our students to do the same in ways that make clear the full range of diversity. This identification needs to be done in a way that establishes status but preserves privacy. We found that providing definitions of nontraditional and traditional status, then allowing students to self-identify their status met both these conditions. The experiences and realizations recounted in our narrative indicate that we needed this identification early in the course. The first day would have been none too soon. Nontraditional student status did not "jump to the eye" (Pendlebury, 1995, p. 60) but required a specific directed effort on our part to make it visible.

While this knowledge is certainly important on an individual basis, it is also important in obtaining a sense of group balance. Are there only a few nontraditional students who may feel outnumbered and out of place? Is there an even balance (as in our experience) that may establish a setting in which both nontraditional and traditional students could expect others to validate their ideas? Early identification can facilitate the design and development of meaningful activities and clarify the parameters of students' needs.

Designing and Developing Activities

Our recognition of the need to identify students' status came too late to do much good in our summer school methods course. However, we now consider the balance of nontraditional and traditional students when we make decisions with respect to activities. We made changes in designing and developing activities in later classes to achieve three instructional goals. Making

this invisible form of diversity visible has helped us 1) create more positive communities of learners, 2) direct some of our choices for grouping and regrouping students, and 3) validate as well as challenge students' prior knowledge.

First, early and comprehensive introductions have helped us create positive communities of learners, where differences are clearly recognized from the outset as strengths. The widely varying experiences of students are viewed as sources of legitimate differences, which support reflection, reconsideration, and application of strategies in a variety of appropriate ways. An example of creating positive communities of learners from our identification and use of students' nontraditional and traditional status is seen in Griffith's use of *The Yellow Cards*[*]. Students use 5" X 7" yellow index cards to record general information regarding themselves and their interactions with schools (e.g., best and worst educational experiences both in and out of the classroom). In the past, these cards were simply collected and used to give the instructors a sense of the class. After the experiences in the social studies methods courses, Griffith added two additional questions that asked students to identify their status as nontraditional or traditional and then indicate which pieces of information from the card they wanted to keep private. Now during each class period, information is read aloud from several cards, beginning with the instructors', as one means of acknowledging and legitimizing differences. The more teacher educators know about their students and the students know about their instructors, the easier it is to form effective working groups and to address individual needs.

Second, identification of traditional and nontraditional students, especially in regard to their representation within a class, informs our grouping of students. We believe it is important to model heterogeneous flexible grouping practices. In the past, we designed activities where students were grouped by interest, gender, culture, and personal preferences. In our experience, nontraditional and traditional students did not mix freely or frequently. We now make certain that we include both nontraditional and traditional students when we group and regroup. The widely varying experiences of students are viewed as sources of legitimate differences, which

[*] Originally developed by Dr. John McLure at The University of Iowa.

support reflection, application, and reconsideration of strategies in a variety of appropriate ways. Our goal is not to create mechanisms for social interaction outside the classroom but to develop a more positive learning community within it.

Finally, in order to design and develop appropriate learning activities, we try to validate and to challenge a vast range of prior experience. If a preservice teacher argues it is impossible for today's students to read their social studies materials, it helps to know whether this impression is garnered from practicum experiences in an elementary classroom, or from experiences as a frustrated parent whose own fourth grader is learning to read differently than her mother did. Initially, we must acknowledge that both experiences are real. Then we need to find ways to move preservice teachers beyond their personal experiences and into thoughtful consideration of educational theory and practice. Use of case studies is one way to make the familiar strange and promote such thoughtful consideration.

Conclusions

We believe that our increased ability to see a wider range of diversity in our classes has enhanced our understanding of students' perceptions, needs, and concerns. As a result of this increased understanding, we have been able to make effective provisions for a broader spectrum of student diversity. However, our experiences and analysis caused us to realize how little we know about the special characteristics of nontraditional students. Teacher educators need better ways to assess nontraditional students' knowledge bases and to determine how these differ from those of their traditional classmates. We also need a better understanding of the influence of nontraditional students' beliefs and values on their acquisition and use of strategies and content. Finally, teacher educators need more effective strategies to make the familiar strange so that preservice teachers can reconsider their experiences in light of effective pedagogy/research. It is possible for individual teacher educators to make effective provisions for nontraditional students within the context of their courses. However, in order to accomplish this we must first make visible this often-invisible status.

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